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Opportunities to Improve Calving Management on Beef Cow/Calf Operations

National Animal Health Monitoring System

Nearly 20 percent of beef heifers require some degree of assistance in calving. How and when this assistance is given may pay dividends for the producer.

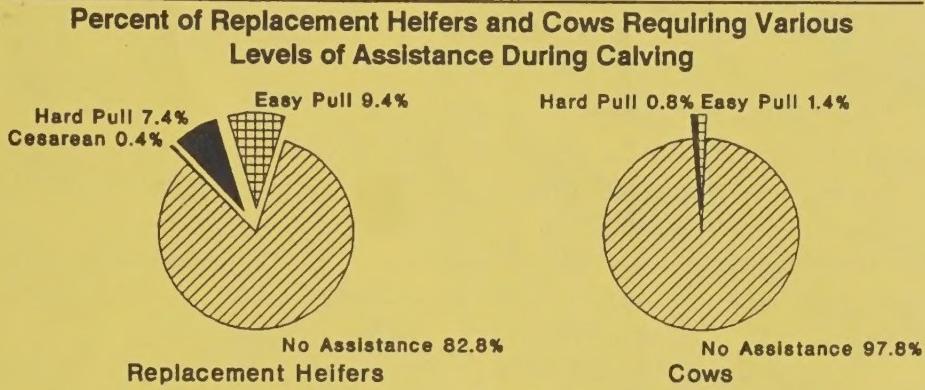
In the USDA's Beef Cow/Calf Health and Productivity Audit (CHAPA), producers reported that 82.8 percent of heifers calving require no assistance in calving (Figure 1). Another 9.4 percent of heifers calving require some minor assistance (easy pull), and 7.4 percent require a significant amount of effort to deliver the calf (hard pull). Only 0.4 percent of heifers require a cesarean section to deliver the calf.

The National Animal Health Monitoring System (NAHMS) conducted the CHAPA on 799 operations located in 18 of the top beef states.¹ Seventy percent of U.S. beef cow/calf operations are in these 18 states.

Numerous studies have shown that dystocia (difficult birth) is a major cause of calf mortality. In 1991, producers reported that 20.4 percent of beef calf (up to 500 pounds) losses were attributed to calving problems. More attention to calving cows and heifers will likely lessen these losses.

Research at the USDA's Agricultural Research Services (ARS) Fort Keogh Livestock and Range Research Laboratory indicates that early assistance in the calving process affects subsequent reproductive capacity of the dam. In their study, early assistance led to a 9 percent increase in the

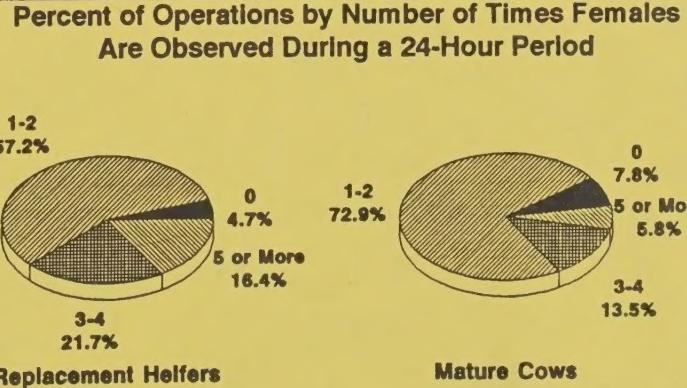
Figure 1



number of animals cycling at the onset of the breeding season and a 14 percent increase in the fall pregnancy rate. In addition, calves from early assisted dams tended to have a higher average daily gain from birth to weaning (+.11 pounds).

However, many producers may not have the opportunity for early intervention because of the way they manage their cattle around calving time. On the average, producers check heifers 2.9 times per 24-hour period during the calving season (Figure 2). Over half of producers (57.2 percent) only check their heifers 1 to 2 times per 24-hour

Figure 2



¹ Alabama, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Mississippi, Missouri, Nebraska, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and Wyoming.

period. This means that heifers having trouble calving may be undetected for up to 12 to 24 hours.

A larger proportion of producers (7.8 percent, Figure 2) do not observe their cows at all during the calving season. Most producers (72.9 percent) observe cows one to two times per 24-hour period during the calving season.

Further, on the average, producers allow heifers to labor for 2.9 hours prior to giving them assistance. Figure 3 shows that nearly half (45.2 percent) of producers allow heifers to labor 3 hours or more before giving assistance. Over 42 percent of producers allow cows to labor 3 or more hours. Substantially more producers allow no labor time for cows (12.7 percent) than for heifers (0 percent).

For some producers, that ability to observe calving animals is dictated by facilities. Only 32.8 percent of cow/calf operations have specialized calving facilities that allow increased observation or shelter. Approximately one-third (33.5 percent) of beef calves are born in these specialized calving areas (Figure 4). Few producers use calving lots, calving pens, or covered sheds or barns for calving.

These management strategies make it difficult to practice early intervention in a difficult calving and make it more likely that dystocia will result in an unfavorable outcome for the calf and have detrimental, longer-term impacts on the reproductive capacity of the dam.

Figure 3

% Operations by Number of Hours Females Were Allowed to Labor Before Given Assistance

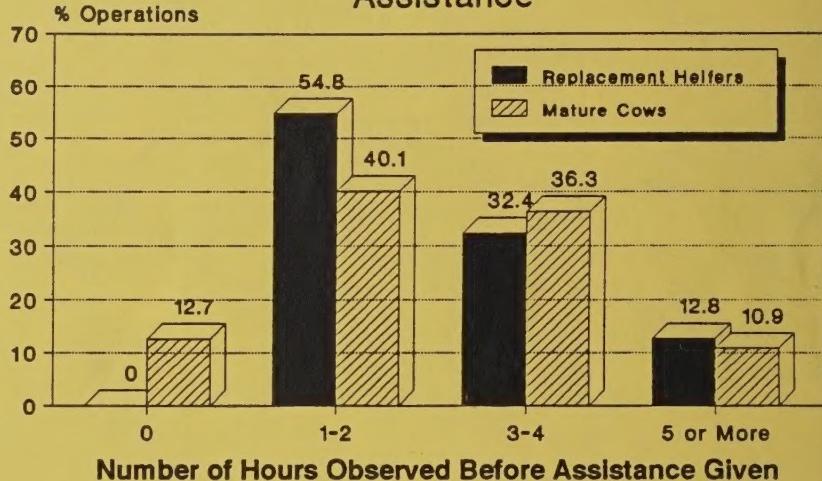
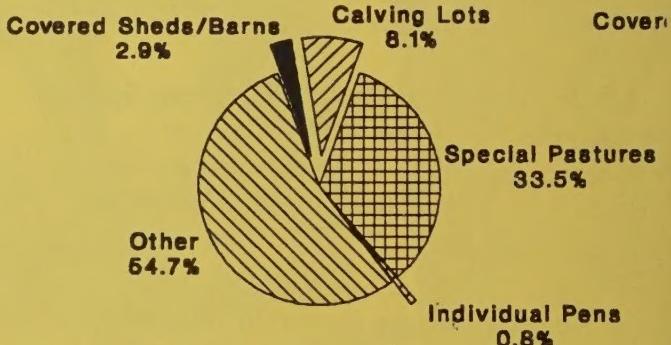


Figure 4

Percent of Calves Born by Location



NAHMS collaborators included the National Agricultural Statistics Service (USDA) and State and Federal Veterinary Medical Officers. For more information, contact:

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